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Allen Cabaniss

University of Mississippi

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THE SONG OF SONGS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

by Allen Cabaniss

It is well known that "the Song of Songs which is Solomon's" (Canticles) is a book of Scripture that has exercised an incalculable influence on Western literature. There are medieval Latin poems in which line after line is derived from it.¹ And its reflection in lyrics of the emerging vernaculars is almost as pervasive.² It was possibly the most powerful single impetus in development of that most typical Western phenomenon, romanticism.³ Yet it had difficulty in being accepted into the Biblical canon. Only by virtue of allegory and liturgy was it finally included.

The rather curious fascination of the book has existed practically from the beginning. At a very early time it became, in one way or another, a part of the Passover liturgy, although more often than not a private part of it.⁴ It is not known whether the Paschal association antedates the New Testament. If so, it would seem strange if there were no allusions to it in the New Testament. There has

¹ Two poems which immediately come to mind are "Quis est hic qui pulsat ad atrium" (attributed to St. Peter Damian) and "Zelo tui languet" (by Richard Rolle of Hampole). See F. J. E. Raby, ed., *The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse* (new and enl. ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 158, 442-448.

² E.g., the anonymous *pastourelle*, "De Saint Quentin a Cambrai," and the *cantiga de amigo*, "Eu velida non dormia," by Pedro Eanes Solaz. See F. Brittain, *The Medieval Latin and Romance Lyric to A. D. 1300* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: University Press, 1951), pp. 158f., 215f.

³ Murray Reston, *Prophet and Poet: The Bible and the Growth of Romanticism* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1965), *passim*. This fine study has particular reference to the eighteenth century, but its applicability is true for earlier periods. See also J. J. Wilhelm, *The Cruellest Month* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1965), esp. pp. 98-104; Stanley Stewart, *The Enclosed Garden* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), a study of seventeenth-century poetry.

⁴ Cf. Philip Carrington, *According to Mark* (Cambridge: University Press, 1960), p. 316: "The fact that the Song of Solomon is read at Passover suggests that such ideas were abroad that night."

been, however, an understandable reluctance among commentators in identifying any citations.⁵ It appears possible nonetheless that there may be at least one.

In II Tim. 1:17 the author states of Onesiphorus that "when he was in Rome he *sought* me diligently *and found* [me]" (*alla genomenos en Romei spoudaios ezetesen me kai heuren*). The passage is remarkably reminiscent of the Septuagint version of Cant. 3:1c, the voice of the young Shulamite speaking of her beloved, "I *sought* him *and found* him not" (*ezetesa auton kai ouch heuron auton*), a passage repeated in Cant. 3:2d and 5:6d.

The complex, "seek and find" (or, "seek and not find"), is, course, a commonplace and appears in a number of forms at many places in Scripture, e.g., in the Old Testament at Josh. 2:22; I Sam. 10:21; II Kings (LXX, IV Kings) 2:17; Isa. 65:1 (aberrantly quoted in Rom. 10:20); Jer. 29: 12 (LXX, 36:13); Hos. 2:7 (LXX, 2:9); and in the New Testament at Matt. 7:7 (Luke 11:19); Luke 2:44, 45, 48; 15:8; John 7:34; Acts 12:19. The New Testament references can probably be discounted as sources of II Tim. 1:17. Of the Old Testament passages only the phrases in Cant. 3:1, 2; 5:6, have the same tense and number as the Timothy passage. It is therefore important to inquire whether there are any further resemblances between II Timothy and Canticles.

There are indeed four other points at which there are slight verbal similarities: cf. II Tim. 1:18, "May the Lord grant (*doie*) him to find pity," with Cant. 8:1, "O that one[God?] would grant (*doie*) you to be my brother"; II Tim. 2:19, "has stood firm, with this inscription (*sphragida*)," with Cant. 8:6, "as a seal (*sphragida*) upon your heart, as a seal (*sphragida*) upon your arm"; II Tim. 4:8, "the garland (*stephanos*) of uprightness, which the Lord . . . will reward me in that day (*en ekeinei tei hemerai*)," with Cant. 3:11, "the

⁵ J. Winandy, "Le Cantique des Cantiques et le Nouveau Testament," *Revue Biblique*, LXXI (Feb. 1964), 161-190, examines the various possibilities but reaches a negative conclusion. I have not seen this article, but it is summarized in *New Testament Abstracts*, IX, No. 2 (Winter 1965), 173. There is a recent discussion by J. Smit, "Une citation du Cantique dans Secunda Petri," *Revue Biblique*, LXXIII, No. 1 (1966), 107-118, of a reflection of Cant. 2:17 (4:6) in II Pet. 1:19; see *New Testament Abstracts*, XI, No. 1 (Fall 1966), 107.

garland (*toi stephanoi*) with which his mother crowned him on the day (*en hemerai*) of his wedding, on the day (*en hemerai*) of his heart's gladness"; and II Tim. 4:21, "Hasten to come before winter (*cheimonos elthein*)" with Cant. 2:11, "Look! the winter has passed away (*cheimon parelthen*).⁶" But, as indicated, the foregoing are very slight agreements. To pursue the issue further it will be necessary to observe whether there may be circumstantial evidence to corroborate these suggestions.

Wide familiarity with the book of Canticles may be deduced from its liturgical use. As noted above, it was prescribed for reading at Paschal time, perhaps publicly at an early period, but privately by the fourth or fifth century of the Christian era. The other occasion was at the end of the day of Atonement: during alternate dancing and singing, Cant. 3:11 was chanted by youths. So the book (or part of it) was employed both at Passover (Mazzoth), a spring festival, and near Tabernacles (Succoth), an autumn festival.⁶ Internally there are indications of autumnal poetry (e.g., 4:13f, 16; 7:11-13) as well as poetry of springtime (esp. 2:11-13). The Song would thus evoke recollection of appropriate passages from Exodus. Does II Timothy in any way reflect these ideas?

There is a reference to Exodus (7:11, 22?) in II Tim. 3:8. The allusions to autumn are fairly frequent: the weary farmer (2:6) the approach of harsh seasons (3:1), chilliness requiring a cloak (4:13), and especially the plea to hasten before winter (4:21). There may be a specific allusion to Succoth in the word *spendomai* ("offered as a libation") in 4:6. Springtime references are neither numerous nor obvious, but there seems to be a Paschal allusion in 1:10, Jesus's abolishing death and bringing life and immortality to light; 2:8, Jesus's rising from the dead; and particularly 2:20, fine and cheap vessels for differing uses (the finest were reserved for the Passover).

In the course of time, moreover, many sentimental and emotional associations would gather, as when an American recalls the glow of

⁶ An excellent treatment is Theophile J. Meek's introduction and exegesis of the Song of Songs in *The Interpreter's Bible*, V (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1956), esp. 91, 95f. A popular but substantial work is Hugh J. Schonfield, *The Song of Songs* (New York: New American Library, 1959), esp. pp. 14-83.

Christmas in other years. These would be, for instance, memories of relatives and friends. The approach of the religious observance would therefore tend to evoke personal recollections. II Timothy contains a number of indications that might suggest such a situation: the writer's mention of his own forebears (1:3) and the peculiarly warm reference to the recipient's mother and grandmother (1:5); the author's feeling of loneliness and abandonment at his first trial (4:16) and during his imprisonment (4:9-11); the appealing prayer for the bereaved family of Onesiphorus (1:16) and the mention of a babe in arms (3:15); and especially the urge to poetry (2:11-13).

It would seem, then, that the circumstantial evidence in the three preceding paragraphs might confirm the four verbal similarities and that both circumstantial evidence and verbal similarities together would tend to confirm an identification of the phrase in II Tim. 1:17 as an allusion to the similar phrase in Cant. 3:1c (repeated in Cant. 3:2d and 5:6d).